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Boris Schuster

A memoir

I have always believed that life is a series of challenges, opportunities, coincidences, and there is no rhyme or reason for what happened or is happening. How else could one explain why I am here in the United States, in South Texas, instead of all places else at the age of 68, through to the most wonderful journey in the world, from wonderful work, from wonderful daughters to law, an unfortunately beautiful grandfather and on and on.

Very much

I am going to attempt to tell something of my life in the best of my ability and recollection so the children and grandchildren may have some knowledge of their father's past.

Suggestions have been made several times by my children and other friends and relatives that it would be a good idea to tell about my life.

For many years I was reluctant, because the last thing in the world I wanted to do was tell about the things that happened to me and my family. I used to close that chapter of my life and forget about it.



I have always believed that life is a series of circumstances, opportunities, coincidences, and there is no rhyme or reason for what happened or is happening. How else could one explain why I am here, in the United States, in South Bend, Indiana, of all places, alive at the age of 68, married to the most wonderful woman in the world, three wonderful sons, three wonderful daughters in law, six unbelievably beautiful grandchildren and on and on.

Why me?

I am going to attempt to tell something of my life to the best of my ability and recollection so my children and grandchildren may have some knowledge of their father's past.

Suggestions have been made several times by my children and other friends and relatives that it would be a good idea to talk about my life.

For many years I was reluctant, because the last thing in the world I wanted to do was talk about the things that happened to me and my family. I tried to close that chapter in my life and forget about it

forever. But, as the years went on and our family grew I realized that some things needed to be told. Maybe some day, if and when our children or grandchildren ask questions, there is at least some record of some part of my life.

I don't know how it's going to work, but I must make the attempt.

(I began this as a recording on a hand held tape recorder on January 22, 1987.)

I was born in Vilna, Poland on April 15, 1925, which is now Vilnius, Lithuania. My father's name was Fival, and my mother's name was Cylia. I don't know if the spelling, Cylia or Fival, is correct; it could be Tilia and Faivel. We never called our parents by name, and never referred to them as "He" or "She". It was always father and mother; so I don't really know if it was Cylia or Tilia.

When we, (Dan, Brian, David and I) revisited Vilnius, Lithuania (it was called Vilna, Poland when I lived there) on September 9th, 1994, we found a document (in a Holocaust Museum) of the street address my family and I lived on in the Vilna Ghetto, and in that document, written in Lithuanian, it list the address as Strasuno, 15 and our names:

Suster Faiva, born 1891. XII .15, occupation galvanizutoris [galvaniser or chrome plater].

Suster Tilia, born 1890. II .2, occupation -----

Suster Josef, born 1926. XII. 5 occupation [not legible; could be furrier]

Suster Ber, born 1927. XI. 30 occupation ----- [that's me]

✓ 91	Suster	Faiva	1891. XII. 15	galvanizutoris
✓ 98	Suster	Tilia	1890. II. 2	-----
✓ 99	Suster	Josef	1926. XII. 5	-----
✓ 100	Suster	Ber	1927. XI. 30	-----

Figure 2: Family Names in the Ghetto Registration Book

The dates as far as I know, may or may not be correct. I don't know when my father, mother, or anyone else in my family was born. I do know that my brother Joseph was about 6 years older than I and that I was born April 15, 1925. We found a lot of Susters in the documents but I have no idea who they are. They could be relatives or just others named Suster that were registered in the documents as residents of the Ghetto in 1942. There are quite a few pages with many names of residents of the Ghetto in 1942.

I don't remember any relative's names, not even what they looked like. It's all a blank. I know that there were four children in my family, the oldest was a girl whom I never knew. She died when she was little, before I was born and I never knew her name. My oldest brother's name was Peretz, my second brother was I think two years younger than Peretz. His name was Yossele in Yiddish, or Joseph. I was, just like David, the "baby" quite a bit younger than my brothers. I was called Berele in Yiddish, and I think Boris was the closest thing to Berele in Polish. We lived on a street called Lotochek [Polish]. I didn't remember that name for many years; as a matter of fact; the name of the street was recalled for me because of an interesting story:

Brian and I were playing a "father and son" softball game. A friend of mine, Morrie Katz and I sat on a bench watching the game, when I noticed a guy with a long mustache sitting by himself on another bench. I asked my friend who the man is and he said that's Sam Perkovich. I walked up to him and introduced myself. He spoke with a very heavy accent. I asked him where he was from. He said: Poland. I asked, where in Poland? He said: Vilna. I said Sam, that's were I am from. Where in Vilna did you live? He said Lotochek. I couldn't believe it. The name exploded in my head. That is the

same street I lived on. Well, his mother was still alive and lived in South Bend. We went over to his house and I talked to his mother, she said she remembered me when I was four or five years old. But she could not help much as to what happened to the rest of my family. They somehow ended up in Russia while we remained in Vilna, Poland. Sam lived in the very same apartment building. He (Sam) is about six years younger than I.

That is how I recalled the name of the street I lived on for 16 years of my life. So I can understand why I don't remember any of my family except my Father's, Mother's, and my two brother's names and not a single name of what I think had to be a very large family.

We lived in a ghetto-like neighborhood, and the neighborhood was probably 90% Jewish; the only gentile I remember was the janitor in our apartment building.

My memory of my youth is very limited. I do remember some things very vividly and other things not at all. I went to a Yiddish school that primarily taught everything in Yiddish. For a few hours each day we did have Polish lessons, but they were like a foreign language to us. I can't remember any schoolmates, or friends.

I only remember one teacher, a math teacher, funny thing was he hated haircuts with a part in the middle or even on the side. I think that is why I never parted my hair but always combed it straight back.

The school was located some distance from where we lived and we had to walk to school through a Catholic Church that was in the path of the school. I remember a schoolyard where we used to practice marching for some kind of parade with a band and flags. Next to the school was an open market with all kinds of foods, tables full of pork, sausages, fruits of every kind. Of course we did not buy any of that; we had a kosher home. But I remember the sight and smells in the market place. I also remember going to a summer camp where there were cows and horses and kayak rides on a river, football or soccer games, hiking in the woods, resting or relaxing exercises, making walking canes and sling shots from pine branches.

That doesn't sound like we were poor but other events that I remember do indicate that we were not well-to-do.

I don't remember having a Bar Mitzvah; I don't know why. I don't even remember my brother's Bar Mitzvah, but of course Bar Mitzvahs were not celebrated the way they are celebrated now. I think if you were called to the Bima and given an Aliah, that was it. I don't think I officially graduated from school; at least I don't recall any ceremonies.

I was about 14 years old when World War II broke out. The Nazis invaded Poland September 1, 1939 from the West, and The Soviets invaded Poland September 17, 1939 from the East. The Nazis and the Soviets divided Poland September 29, 1939.

The Soviets ceded Vilna to Lithuania in October 1939. I found these dates in literature about World War II. I think it was the last year of me going to school, but there was no official ceremony or graduation. I went to work as an apprentice, first in a barber shop, then in a clothing store, and then in a machine shop.

We were under the Russian occupation for two years, from 1939 till 1941. Things were pretty nice for us while the Russians occupied Vilna. This was because we were a working class family, poor, and liberal and the Russians took kindly to those people. After all, that's what Communism was supposed to be about.

I vaguely remember a Russian soldier staying in our apartment for a few nights. He kept his gun under his pillow and I was very impressed. He was always bragging about how wonderful communism was and of course I believed him. Anything had to be better than living in Poland. I was

very much influenced by communism, and I read some about Trotsky, Lenin, the Bolshevik movement, the Russian revolution and the First World War. We had no idea of the Stalin atrocities, and the people who suffered under his tyranny. Of course, no one else knew about them at that time.

I remember I was working (at the age of 14) in a clothing store as a "go for" for a while, as an apprentice in a barber shop, and then as a apprentice in a machine shop where I worked for about a year till the Germans overran Vilna. As an apprentice, I learned under the very tough instructions of a Master Machinist who would only teach you the trade if you bought him vodka to drink and even then he was mean. But what I did learn in the short time I worked there saved my life later on.

While I was working in the machine shop I became friendly with a son of a Russian officer who also was an apprentice in the shop. I don't remember his name but I do remember him introducing me to the first alcoholic drink of vodka. We became good friends, and we were waiting one night to unload a truck of steel. He had been drinking for awhile. I think he was older than I was. He bought a bottle of vodka that was the size of a coke bottle. That's how they sold them. He put his thumb halfway down the bottle and drank half of it in one gulp, and then handed me the bottle. You can imagine. It was a matter of me accepting the drink, or admitting that I didn't drink, which I didn't want to do. Well, I drank the vodka, and the next thing I remember was waking up at home. I must have passed out cold. I don't remember how I got home or if anything was said about it by my parents.

I started smoking when I was 14, and of course my parents didn't know it. One day I came home after work and took my working clothes off (we wore overalls to work and I kept my cigarettes in a breast pocket of the overalls) before sitting down to eat. My cigarette pack must have fallen out of my overalls, and after we ate dinner, my father offered me a cigarette from my pack. I thought I would catch hell, but he was very nice about it and just said he didn't want to see me smoke at home. Nothing much was made of it.

We spoke Yiddish at home, and since most of the people living in the neighborhood were Jews, Polish was rarely spoken among us. Vilna was predominately Catholic with many churches and if you walked near or through a church property you had to remove your hat as a symbol of respect. Well, we Jewish kids didn't think much of that and tried to pass through that church without removing our hats. The Polish kids on the other hand knew this and were waiting for us. Of course, the result was that we used to get beaten up by the Polish kids on the way to school. They made us get off the sidewalk and take our hats off because of the statues of Jesus and the saints. If we didn't do it, they would beat the hell out of us. But we persisted and tried not to take our hats off. It's very difficult to go back and have any sort of a sequence.

I've tried for many years to go back and reconstruct events but could not recollect. I just cannot recall names and dates and events. Some of the dates I mention here are from books or articles describing the events that happened at the time. Some survivors I have talked to remember dates, places, names; I cannot. Maybe some of it is blocked out, I don't know. When I start thinking about it, it's just a vague recollection, like in a dream. When you're dreaming, it's plain and simple. But when you try to recall it in the morning, it no longer makes sense. Like it hasn't happened or it doesn't make sense that it did happen.

For example;

I was talking about going through that church, why does that stick in my mind so much? I don't know, but I do remember that it was a big thing. Being beaten up should not have made such an impression on me because living in Poland, pogroms and other atrocities against Jews were not so unusual. There were pogroms throughout Poland and Russia, everyone knows about them, and we had them in Vilna Poland.

Anyway, to get back to my family.

My grandfather (my father's father) was a lumberjack. My father told me he was killed in a lumberjack accident. (I don't think I ever knew him). From my mother's side, I don't know much either. I remember there was an apartment we used to visit, and there was an old lady who I think was my Grandmother from my mother's side. You see, all I know of my Grandmother is that she was "an old lady". What a shame.

That makes me want to write this more than ever. But as I say, it's like a dream. I cannot recall the faces or places. But I think if I would go back there (to Vilna). I may be able to reconstruct it. That's how vague all these things are. I know we lived in an apartment consisting of a living room, a kitchen without running water, no toilet (there was a community toilet, an "outhouse" in the courtyard). It was rough because in the winter we had to use a pot or pan and carry it outside. We had no running water; we had to go about five blocks to a place where there was a public water faucet. From there we would carry two buckets on a bar across the shoulders. The buckets were attached to ropes at each end of the bar. Two pieces of wood formed like a cross were placed in the buckets that kept the water from splashing out.

I am reaching deep in the past.

My mother was a loving, kind, typical "Jewish" mother. The thing I remember most about her is that she was always working in the house, cooking, washing, and sewing. We had a wooden floor, and on Friday, before the Sabbath, she would scrub the floor and cover it with either sawdust or newspapers, so the floor wouldn't be messed up.

My father was in the Russian army during the Czar's time. I was told that our real name (my grandfather's name) was Czeikinski. During the First World War, they were switching names to avoid military service. I was told this when I was less than 15, and I'm not clear on the details. My father was a Chrome and Nickel Plater. He worked for an outfit I think was Polish owned.

I recall when I was little I carried lunches to him. The place he worked in was absolutely horrible. It was a dark dirty place with a dirt floor. The cobwebs were hanging from the ceiling, maybe 5 or 6 feet long. The dust was unbelievable from polishing the chrome. Even though my father wore several aprons, his underclothes were still filthy from the dust that collected after polishing the spoons, forks, and samovars. He would bring work home and I would help him polish by hand, silver spoons, candle holders, forks, knives and other small items. I remember my father as being a very good person. I know he was not a very religious man, although to satisfy my mother (who was religious) he would do whatever was needed on the Sabbath or High Holidays. He would go to Schul, and conduct seder services and other religious services at home. People would come to the apartment for meals. I don't remember whether they were relatives or not, but on some festive occasions, he would preside at the table.

We had one bedroom in the apartment with a large bed where my father and mother slept. At the foot of the bed was a curtain; I suppose for privacy. I slept on a small bed in the same bedroom, and I think my middle brother, Yossele, slept in the same room. My oldest brother slept on a couch in the living room that also served as an eating or dining room. The apartment was heated by a large floor-to-ceiling wood burning oven. There was a kitchen with a "in the wall" type baking oven that was heated with coal or wood. Most of the meals were prepared on a kerosene burner or in the wood burning oven.

It's getting to be very difficult to remember things from 50 years ago. There are some things that are vivid and dear to me, memories that I cherish of my mother and Father, that are difficult to talk about because I'm sitting here in my office on January 22, 1987, It's snowing outside, and I feel like an idiot talking to myself! Part of this story started by recording it on tape. But I don't know of any other way to accomplish the remembering [of] one's life history. I don't want to become morbid about this, but it's painful to go back and refresh memories about loved ones. I really, from time to time, feel that

I've missed so much. I still, to this day, choke up when I remember my mother and father and how wonderful they were to us, and how this connection was ripped apart so suddenly.

I hope not to make it sound so [sad] that people feel sorry for me, but on the other hand, I don't want it to be just a factual thing like dates and places because I really don't remember much of the dates and places when I was that young.

I do remember my oldest brother worked in a machine shop. I remember he played a tuba and very little more about him. I don't remember what my middle brother did. I do remember he had a habit of knitting a small piece of bread with his fingers and keeping it in his pockets. My mother would scream at him for this. The few things I do recall are a scene at the dinner table:

My father always sat in the same place, in the same chair, at the head of the table, to the right of him set Peratz, across set Joseph, I sat across from Peretz and to the left of Joseph, across from my father set my mother. My mother served dinner and I remember as if it was yesterday. The meat was a large "knadel" boiled meatball. Peratz stuck the fork in it and bounced it on the plate; the meatball either bounced or didn't bounce. I don't know what it was supposed to do, but my brother pushed the plate away and wouldn't eat the meatball. That is the only time I recall my father raising his voice, ordering my brother away from the table and telling my mother not to give him any other food till he ate the meatball. Of course I don't know if they carried out the threat, but somehow the event stuck in my mind to this day.

There are many such events that stuck in my mind and for the life of me I don't know why they made such an impression on me. When other events, I am sure more important things, are not remembered at all. Sometime in 1936 or 1937, things were really bad. I know now that the depression was going on, and my father didn't have a job. From time to time he worked on street gangs that were replacing cobblestones; and he would bring home a loaf of bread and a herring, my mother would make a meal from it for the whole family. From time to time I recall my mother [would] remove the tablecloth from the dining room table remove the single light bulb from the overhead fixture, hide anything that looked valuable from view. I didn't know it then but I know now why my mother took the tablecloth off the dining room table. People would come over, I think to inspect the apartment. I think they were from the welfare department.

The street we lived on was a very narrow downhill street with a sidewalk on one side of the street. It was a great street to sled downhill in the winter; so we would grab the back of a horse driven sleigh going uphill and slide downhill on our own power. That I remember was fun even though the sled driver would try to get us off holding onto the sled by using his horsewhip. I remember a park in the neighborhood that was flooded with water in the winter and we would go ice-skating. I have good memories of a close knit family. I remember there was a lot of hugging and kissing. There is a picture in my mind, where my mother is holding me in her lap, sitting on a stool in front of the stove in the living room on a cold winters night looking at the flames, and singing to me in Yiddish, "OYF'N Pripetshok" (a very famous Yiddish song). In June 1941, the Germans entered Vilna, and that's when everything really started to get bad. The Germans entered Vilna and were welcomed by the Polish and Lithuanian population with flowers and cheers. The Russians evacuated quickly. My oldest brother went with the Russian army and disappeared.

I think it took only about two weeks for the Germans to overtake the Russian occupied part of Poland and then some. It was chaos, and everyone was running around, not knowing what was going to happen. We, my middle brother, my parents, and the rest of the family, approximately 80-100 people (as far as I know) remained in Vilna.

At first, we didn't know what was going on as far as the German occupation. The Poles and Lithuanians took over the police, and they were worse than any German could ever be. They knew all the Jews and where they lived, and they would drag them out of hiding places. Each day, more Jews

were taken away, first the men. They would take people out of their homes or apartments. They would take them away with only a bar of soap and a towel, presumably to go to work, but no one would ever see them again. I found out much later that 35,000 Jews were taken to Ponary, a wooded area 10 miles from Vilna and murdered there.

You have to understand that even though Vilna was a city of about 200,000 people, we, the Jews, lived in a ghetto-like neighborhood anyway and it was easy for the Poles, Lithuanians and Germans to identify and gather the Jews at will. I don't remember ever leaving the area (other than going to school or an occasional trip to some relatives). We had no car; we traveled either by bus or horse-driven taxi. I don't think I ever left town to go to another city.

The Polish police knew where everyone was, and little by little they took more people, until suddenly they took us. There were many raids on our apartment. We hid in many places to avoid capture, under floorboards in the attic, or in places where we played "hide and seek". I remember something I can't believe even today that I hid in an outhouse by holding on to the cover while my feet were hanging down in human waste. I told this story to Steve Ross years before the movie "Schindler's List" was made. It's almost unreal that someone else had the same experience. I was told that a similar scene is in the movie "Schindler's List" (I never saw the movie). At the final raid they found everyone left hiding. It didn't matter how old, how young, healthy or sick. Because if you were Jewish, he or she was herded into the street taking only what he or she could carry. I remember we made bundles from bed sheets and filled them with soft goods so we could carry them to wherever we were going. On the way they made us run till we dropped everything we carried. Of course they did that intentionally because trucks were following us to pick up all that we dropped. We were marched to the center of Vilna, which was where the majority of the Jewish population lived and all the synagogues were located. They took about 20 blocks of city streets, built walls, and herded about 50,000 Jews into the area. This was called the ghetto. It was probably 15-20 blocks from our house to the ghetto. When we got to the ghetto, all I can remember was my mother, father, and brother. I don't remember any other relatives, I don't know why, because I'm sure they were there. This became our home for the next two years of our lives.

My Mother died soon after; I don't know the date, but it had to be in 1941. My mother had a double hernia. One day I came back from work, and she was dead, just like that. She died from a "hernia strangulation". I know they took her to a hospital, and I never saw her again. I don't even remember a funeral. Or sitting shiva or saying Kaddish.

Every morning we would be taken by truck or on foot to work. The Gestapo or SS would come into the Ghetto each morning and with the help of our own Jewish capos herd all the able bodied men to a central location. If you thought you weren't able bodied, the Gestapo or capos would beat you until you changed your mind. They would take you by truck or on foot to a place where you would work. The work was hard labor, loading and unloading coal, cement and building materials of all kinds from trains or trucks. We also cut up parts of airplanes that were shot down so they could be sent back to Germany for recycling. We were constantly watched by SS soldiers; they made us run from one place to another just for the fun of it. It seemed if there was more than one soldier guarding us, they would compete to see who could be the meanest and the most cruel.

After work, we would be marched back to the ghetto. It's not clear to me how we lived in the ghetto or how many families lived in one house. I vaguely remember some Jewish theater we went to and some underground activity like planning a revolt. We were rationed food, like a loaf of bread for five people, and whatever else was available. I know that it was bad. We would trade things like one kind of food for another, but I don't remember having a regular meal like sitting down at a table with my father or my brother. My father, brother, and I were never taken to work to the same place. We had only the evenings together.

My father had an ulcer. He had terrible acid in his mouth and ate baking soda to stop the burning sensation. I did the same for many years even when I came to the States.

The ghetto life went on like this for about two years, and each day was the same thing. We would be taken to work in the morning and brought back in the evening. More and more people didn't come back at night, and we didn't know why. Sometimes 200-300 people wouldn't show up. We didn't pay a lot of attention, because the name of the game was survival, and we were all very busy looking out for ourselves. By that I mean, if you could find something to eat, a carrot, sugar beet, or potato when you were working in the field, you grabbed it and ate it, and you didn't care about anyone else. I remember saying that the Poles were worse than the Germans. We also had Jewish police (capos) in the ghettos, and they were as bad, if not worse, than the Poles and the Germans. The capos were given the authority to control our lives. They were like the internal police of the ghetto. They would beat on you just like the Germans and Poles did, and they would make sure you went to work. They really were helpers to the Germans. If they needed a 1000 people to liquidate (which we didn't know then, but we know now), the capos would be the ones to find in the hiding places, in the basements or attics, or wherever we could find a place to hide, and physically beat us all until they came up with 1000. One day I was taken to work in a place where, because of my experience in a machine shop. I was using a torch to cut up the aluminum parts of an airplane into small enough pieces that could be loaded onto trains and taken back to Germany for recycling. There were a lot of rumors, and the feeling was that we were going to be raided at this work place and taken somewhere to be shot.

Well, sure enough, in the morning SS surrounded the place where we were working. There was a wire fence around the work area, with barbed wire on top. As soon as we saw the trucks pull into view with the Gestapo on them, everyone started running. I jumped over the fence and tore my right leg on the barbed wire, I still have a scar from that. I remember I fell over on the other side of the fence, into a potato field. I ran to the other side of the potato field, and passed out (fainted). When I woke up, it was dark. I remembered shots and screaming before I fainted. When I woke up at dusk, I heard what sounded like a cow walking through the potato field and chewing on the plants. It wasn't a cow, it was a Polish woman who saw me hiding in the potato field. She waited until it was dark, she told me to get out of her potato field or she will call the Germans. Here I was alone, and no longer under the guard of a German. But what does one do when he is in Poland and can't speak the language well enough to pass for a Pole? Even if you could speak enough Polish to pass as a Pole, where do you go? My hair was cut short, and Jews never looked like Poles anyway. And we knew no Pole would hide us. Well, as strange as it sounds, I went back to the ghetto on my own.

I waited overnight in the potato field. In the morning, I saw a group of Jews being marched back into the ghetto. So I jumped into the line and went back to the ghetto. That's how crazy it was.

The ghetto was liquidated in 1943. I was still with my dad and brother. I remember that day. They assembled us in columns, four abreast, all facing to the front. The German officers would walk in front of the column and just by looking at you choose who goes to work or stays behind in the camp or is put on trucks and taken someplace else maybe not to return at all. This was usually the way we were chosen for work details or other reasons such as moving from one camp to another. Some time one had to run from one point to another and the first number they needed reaching that point was kept in that camp. The others were loaded on trucks and taken some place (we had no idea where). But this day was different, we sensed that this was the day they will liquidate the ghetto completely. It was not unusual for pushing and shoving and where fathers, sons, and brothers took advantage of the situation, by pushing somebody ahead of them or moving to the back of the line or in the middle of the line. They were hoping they wouldn't be the first to be looked at by the so-called German doctors or officers or whoever was deciding who lives, who goes where, and whatever. This wasn't the first time I was exposed to this kind of thing; I was exposed to it many times, but this was different. No one told

us, but we knew it was the end because the capos were in line with us. There were no more capos. They became like everyone else, which was a sign that the ghetto was being closed for good.

Men and women were separated. I was separated from my father and brother. I was 18, and there were younger kids with us. I wasn't exceptionally big or strong, and I remember pinching my cheeks to make my face look healthy. I never looked the officer in the eye. I looked at his breastbone, but never in the eyes. Because if you looked him in the eye, imagine the feeling if someone says "you." If you didn't look him in the eye and someone says you, someone will hit you soon enough to get you out of the column. The one who got hit would be chased out of the column and put on a truck or cattle car or whatever. You didn't know what would happen.

So, the Ghetto has been liquidated, my mother is dead and my oldest brother is in eastern Russia. Or gone; maybe dead. At the assembly place, I remember my father and brother standing in the same column I was. My father always had acid indigestion and heartburn. We Jews always thought this was a part of life, but he would eat baking soda by the tablespoon. He always had terrible heartburn. I saw him in a lot of pain in the lineup. They took him away someplace, and they loaded me (I don't remember if my brother was with me) into a cattle car. And that's the last I saw of my father. I think my father was 53 at the time, and I doubt if he survived more than a day or two or at all. I saw my brother twice after that. The first time, I think we were in the same camp, but I don't remember where or when. The last time I saw him was three months before I was liberated. I was on a detail collecting corpses from barracks, he was in the barrack. I recognized him, and offered him a piece of my bread. He refused and said he didn't need it. His physical condition was terrible. He looked like a skeleton he was covered with maggots, and he couldn't possibly have lived for more than a few hours longer.

After the closing of the ghetto in Vilna in 1943, I was in many camps (called Arbeitslager in German, which means working camp). They were somewhere in Lithuania or Estonia, which was adjacent to (just north) of Vilna, Poland. The work was the same as in the ghetto, loading and unloading coal, cement and all kinds of building material. We were moved from camp to camp. We never knew where we were. We were herded around from place to place depending on where they needed workers. They would get us into a lineup, pick 100 or 500, whatever they needed for work, and take us there. I remember I was at the "end of my ropes". I had a boil on my neck, and I was sick. We were loading cement bags from a train to a truck, and we had to run on the way back to the train for another bag or we were beaten with the butt of a rifle.

Well, I was just about ready for the end. Suddenly a truck pulled up with some German soldiers and an SS Captain on it. They stopped us from working and assembled us in a column and asked us if there were auto mechanics among us. They needed two mechanics. A friend of mine was a chauffeur by trade and knew something about cars. He was standing next to me in the column; he was older than I. I never saw what the underside of a car hood looked like, but he was a chauffeur and he knew something about it. So he kind of gave me a jab in the side and said: "that's us". When we raised our hands, they took us on a truck to a place where they repaired equipment for the military. They gave us some food (leftovers from the soldiers). It was the best food we had in years. After we ate, they gave each of us a toolbox and we were supposed to replace an engine in a truck, which I knew nothing about. My friend did, but I didn't. It made that SS officer so angry he almost killed me on the spot. He started hitting me and yelling: "what are you?, Fritz", (he called me Fritz for some reason). I think it was an expression like "yank" or "Kraut". I told him I was a lathe operator, a machinist. So he grabbed me by the neck, dragged me up to a truck that had a lathe in it. It was a machine shop, it had a small lathe in it, beautifully equipped like the Germans were known to [have]. He dragged me up there and gave me a bolt and told me to make a nut for it. Then he locked me in for several hours while I made that nut. When he came back and tested it to see if it was working well enough, he was satisfied.

That is the man that saved my life more than once. Because for the next almost two years, he would know ahead of time which camp was being liquidated and he would send a truck to pick me up so I wouldn't be there. There was one time, I recall, I was sick with a cold. He gave me aspirin and let me sleep on the floor in the machine truck and hid me. The machine truck I was working in had an air compressor. Trucks loaded with prisoners would drive up to get more air for the tires. They were being taken to the woods or wherever to be shot. On the way back the trucks had bloodstains on them; so I knew that they were the trucks that were taking people to be shot. But this SS Captain kept an eye on me. He and I had many conversations. He couldn't believe that a Jew could be a mechanic or a machinist, he was always arguing with me, (I spoke German well enough to carry on a conversation). That Jews were bankers or lawyers or doctors, and there where no craftsman among them, fascinated him. Since I could do something with my hands.

I used to make ashtrays for him and cigarette lighters from spent shells and all kinds of trinkets. I also made some parts for trucks. For whatever reason, he kept me alive.

Early in 1945, when the Russian armies advanced deeper into Poland and Germany, he no longer could hang onto me. The German army, with all their equipment, was retreating deeper into Germany. All the camps in Eastern Europe were liquidated as the Russian army advanced. I lost the protection of this SS captain who had saved my life on many occasions. Some how I was one of the few that were still thought to be of some value to the Germans. So after the camps were closed, we were loaded into cattle cars and transported to a location somewhere in Estonia. We were given some bread and nothing else to eat for the entire trip. I think we were on this train for many days. We urinated through the cracks in the walls of the cattle cars while the train was moving. I can still hear the noise the train made over the rails. Many died. The train would stop just long enough to remove the corpses. From the train we were loaded on a ship somewhere in Estonia and ended up in a concentration camp called Stutthoff, in Poland. Stutthoff was a very large camp, something on the order of Auschwitz, Dachau or Buchenwald. That was the first and only camp I was in that had cremation ovens. The camp housed both men and women in separate barracks. (I did not know it at the time, but I found out later, by talking to Mom of my experiences in that camp, I learned that she was in the same camp at the same time I was).

The work was the same as in the other camps, but the conditions in the barracks were different. We slept in bunks made of wood, three tiers high. In the middle of the barracks was a large drum like an oil drum that served as an oven. After work we would sit around that drum and try to keep warm. It also served as a "delousing" tool. Let me try to explain what I mean: Our clothing, which consisted of a striped uniform, was full of lice and one way to kill the lice was to brush the seams of the uniform where the lice seemed to concentrate against the red-hot drum. It sounded like a machine gun, "Fried lice". Also in the barracks was a large wooden box about 4 foot wide and maybe 10 foot long that served as a toilet. That was emptied in the morning. In the morning, about 5 AM, we washed in a room with many basins. Then we were assembled in a large yard. I remember it was cold and dark. There may have been 1000 men huddled in the cold to keep warm waiting for whatever food we would get. Usually some of us would be selected to bring large containers with "tea". It was some kind of weed, not real tea, but it was warm. A loaf of bread would be given for five people. One of the five would be selected to divide the bread. It was an honor to be selected because that person was trusted to be honest and fair. The loaf was measured with a string and divided into five parts; then one person would turn around and, while pointing to a piece of bread, call out the name of the person who would get that piece. As a reward for dividing the bread, the person who did the dividing would get the crumbs left over from cutting the loaf, in addition to his regular portion. Then they would select a number of us to make up a work detail. Only luck would determine what kind of work one was going to do that day. We were given watery soup around noon. At the end of the day we would either be driven by truck or we marched back to camp. If we were marched back, we walked in a column of fours. The trick was to get close to the sidewalk, because if you were close to the sidewalk you could take a

chance and pick up cigarette butt from the gutter. If you survived the beating from the guard, you would either smoke the butt or trade it for food when you got to the barracks. In the barracks, we would be assembled for a body count. If no one was missing, we would get more soup (potato or cabbage). The soup was ladled out of a large container like a large wooden box resembling the toilet in the barrack. The trick was to maneuver yourself in the mass of people lined up for the soup not to be too soon and get thin soup or too late or get nothing. It was an art of survival. Back in the barracks you climbed in a bunk dead tired and fully dressed to keep warm. If you took your shoes off (we used them as a pillow) and someone stole them and you didn't have shoes for work the next morning you were as good as dead.

The last camp, I recall, was in a small town in Germany, near Stuttgart, called Balingen. When the camp in Balingen was liquidated, about 5000 of us were marched on a highway to what we later found out was the concentration camp called Dachau. There were all kinds of prisoners, some were criminals, many were Gypsies, Poles, some were Russian soldiers, prisoners of war, and of course many Jews. We were marching in the daytime, and slept at night in barns. While marching during the day in large columns, four abreast, on the highways, we were surrounded by SS troops with dogs. If someone could not keep up with the column or fell, from hunger or fatigue, the SS shot them on the spot.

There were many air raids from the French Air Force while we were marching, and the SS would order us to hide in the ditches till the air raid was over. Suddenly one day, while marching, we heard shots, we thought it was another air attack to which we were getting accustomed to, and the command from the soldiers was to go to the ditches. This was so we could not be seen from the air. We hid in the ditches, but when we looked around there were no more SS troops. They ran away and left us. It was the French army that was coming at us; it was not an air attack. It's hard to describe, of course, what it was like. Thousands of prisoners, Jews, Gypsies, Russians, Poles, freed at the same time in the same place. Many started looking for the German soldiers, and if they found them they killed them on the spot. The majority went looking for food or clothes. We tore open doors of trains that were still parked on the trestles and we found all kinds of things. The Germans wore boots with hobnailed soles on them. We found trainloads of just the hobnailed soles, leather jackets, leather pants, all kinds of military clothing. We wore nothing but rags; so we put on boots, and in a sack we carried an extra pair; one couldn't wear those out if he walked for a hundred years, but we were so insecure that we had to have an extra pair of soles to take with us. I put on a leather jacket on top of my striped coat. A French officer told me I better take that off or they'll think I'm a German. So we kept our uniforms on over the top of the leather jackets. The French soldiers gave us food, cheese and wine, we ate all we could, vomited, and ate some more. We were starving for more than four years.



A professional photographer took this picture about three weeks after we were liberated. Quite a few of my friends that were liberated at the same time, I think, ended up at the same place, and had this photographer take posed pictures of us. I recall he powdered our faces to make us look better than we really did. Most of the guys pictured here signed the back of their pictures saying " a remembrance to Ber Schuster, Balingen 13, 5, 1945.



Freedom was frightening. After being told for four years what to do every moment of my life, I was free and alone, even though there were many of my friends and acquaintances who were in the



camps with me. I still had to make all the decisions for the future, on my own. I don't know how it came about, but I decided to go to Stuttgart. So, I took a bicycle from somewhere, I don't know where I found it, but we took just about anything we wanted. The Germans didn't complain. I bicycled to Stuttgart.



The conqueror of Hitler's Germany

Stuttgart, like most of the cities in Germany was in shambles. There was almost nothing standing without major damage. The first thing I did (unlike most survivors) was look for work. I left "my" bicycle outside the office of a German employment agency and went inside to talk to someone about work as a mechanic. They did refer me to a place, but when I got out of that office "my" bicycle was gone. I did go to work for a German repair shop as a mechanic, but not for pay. I worked there for myself and did whatever I wanted. I decided to rebuild a truck from the bombed out trucks left on the streets of Stuttgart. I did just that, and sold it or traded it on the black market for other goods or food. I didn't do what most all other Jewish survivors did. They concentrated in one place, in an United Nations Repatriation Agency (UNRA) camp, in Stuttgart, called "Degerloch". Degerloch was an abandoned German Country Club taken over by UNRA. I knew quite a few survivors that lived there. But I chose to live in Stuttgart with a German family. They of course liked that very much. It must have given them security. I didn't care. I wanted to assimilate, I wanted little or nothing to do with the past. I was very comfortable with non-Jews, even with Germans. I hated Poles more than anyone. I spoke German well enough to be accepted by Germans. But I did stay in contact with a few friends (one of them was Paul Orbach). I don't remember exactly how we became acquainted but we did "bum" around together. Degerloch was located on a hill and there was a tram that would take you up to the camp. One day Paul and I went up there to a Purim dance. We had a few drinks and we were very happy. I went into a large dance hall and joined the rest of my friends. On one side of the room were a lot of young girls sitting or standing, talking to each other and having a good time. I saw a beautiful young lady and I walked up to her and asked her for a dance. Her name was **ALICE HES**. We danced and had a good time. I fell in love.



Boris Schuster and Alice Hes

Even though I lived in an apartment in Stuttgart (not with the German family any more), I visited Alice often. She lived in a room with a girlfriend, and for the next six weeks or so we saw each other quite often. Alice made contact with her father and sister in the US through a Jewish soldier and was preparing to go to the States. In the mean time, her father sent her food packages and we would share some of the powdered eggs and Hershey bars and really had a good time. There were other girls I became friendly with in that UNRA camp and most of Alice's friends, boys and girls, became good company. Some of my other girlfriends even promised to help me come to the US after they arrived there. I never heard from any of them.

So, Alice left Stuttgart for the States and I still remember the goodbye and the tears at the parting. I never thought I would see or hear from her again. I stayed in Stuttgart and continued on with my life not knowing what comes next. I dealt on the black market, trading things like cigarettes for food or cameras, anything I could get a hold of and exchange for other things. I did communicate with Alice by mail but had no hope of seeing her again. One day I remember standing on a street in Stuttgart, thinking of going back to Poland or Russia. All you had to do was jump on a truck going in that direction when a friend of mine came over and said: Boris, there is mail for you in your apartment mailbox. That was a letter from Alice asking me if I would like to come to the US. My thought was "why not"? I had no place else to go, I didn't know of anyone looking for me and frankly I didn't care. I didn't want to reconnect with any one in my past, not even with my family. That was my state of mind at the time. So I said yes to the invitation. I went to the American Consulate August 23, 1946 and applied for a visa.

At the consulate I was interviewed by an American officer, who asked me where I was born. I said Vilna, Russia. He said: Vilna was in Poland in 1925. I said I don't want to be identified as a Polish national. Well, he said, if you want to be identified as a Russian national you may never get to the States or at least not for several years. I said you are right, I am a Polish national. Good he said, mazel tov. When I decided to go to the States I started to gather things that people thought [would be] of value in the States. I don't remember how, but I accumulated porcelain figures, an oil painting of some value and a suitcase of long underwear, yes, long underwear.

The Marine Marlin



Rumors had it that there was a shortage of long underwear in the States. It took about three months for the visa and other papers to be completed. Once the papers were completed, I went to Bremen to board a ship for the States. While in Bremen, waiting for a ship, a coal strike broke out in the States and no ships were coming or going to the States. I waited for several months before the opportunity came to board a small troop carrier, called "Marine Marlin".

There was a bulletin board in the lobby of the place I was staying in, while waiting for a ship, with daily information about ships going to the States. One day there was an announcement that there was room for a few single young men, on the "Marine Marlin" willing to bunk in the lowest bunks. I took it. We sailed January 8, 1947. At first, the ship looked large and safe. I was very excited and couldn't wait for the upcoming adventure. For the first few days, while the ship was sailing through the English Channel, I ate everything in sight, drank Coca-Cola for the first time in my life and enjoyed it all. But things changed drastically in the next few days. The weather changed and the sea became rough. I, (and probably most of the passengers aboard), got seasick. I think I vomited for the next few days. For the next 14 days or so we rocked and rolled. It seemed like we were leaning to one side the rest of the trip. Aboard ship were all kinds of passengers, mostly Jewish, some ultra religious. They



would huddle together and pray at least three times a day. It reminded me of Vilna or the concentration camps; I wanted none of it. I felt uncomfortable being identified with them, I wanted to assimilate, put all that behind me and not be reminded of the past. I felt that way for many years and unconsciously or consciously acted to achieve that. I arrived in New York January 24, 1947. I remember the night we arrived; most passengers had someone waiting for them, people cried, hugged and kissed. I was one of the last to get off the ship; I was in no hurry. I didn't expect any one to meet me, but to my surprise a friend from Stuttgart was waiting for me. He took me to a hotel

somewhere on Broadway and 103rd street. After I checked in, he took me for a walk down Broadway. I cannot describe the feeling of amazement and bewilderment, the sky scrapers, the store windows full of goods, the food, boxes of oranges, apples, on the sidewalks, AMERICA. My friend gave me a train ticket to South Bend and three dollars. With the three dollars, we bought a bag of oranges and the next morning he took me to the train station. I was on my way to South Bend, Indiana. I couldn't speak a word of English. So here I am, on a train to South Bend, Indiana, to meet my girl friend having no idea where it is. No language, no money, hungry, I was so embarrassed, I ate the oranges in the walkway between the cars.

A Polish couple noticed me and started a conversation with me in Polish. They bought me breakfast, and told the conductor to keep an eye on me and tell me when to get off in South Bend. After a long 14 hours on the train, I arrived in South Bend. Alice, her sister Renate, and her father waited for me at the train station in South Bend. I was surprised at how Alice had changed. She had a different accent than I remembered in Germany. She had already made a lot of friends and was on her way to becoming part of the community. I, on the other hand, was bewildered, unsure of what was happening, and my not being able to speak English at all, I felt like a fish out of water. Not to mention that I didn't have a penny to my name, a place to stay, and was completely dependent on the advice and help from Alice's father or any one else willing to help. Alice and her father took me to see Phil Welber; he was the President of the Jewish community council in South Bend at the time. He had a hand in helping Alice's father prepare an affidavit declaring his support and that of the community, promising I would not be a burden to the Government.

Enter copy of affidavit

Alice's father Alice and I went to the office of Phil Welber. We talked in Yiddish or German (interpreted by Alice and her father) and, as soon as he heard that I worked on cars or was a machinist, he immediately called a friend of his who happened to be the son of the owner of a Cadillac and Oldsmobile agency in town. There was a shortage of auto mechanics as well as cars after the war and Alice's father's comment was: "you will never have to worry about making a living if you take this job". I of course knew little or nothing about cars, although my certificate of entry to the states listed my occupation as mechanic. I had no desire to work in a machine shop, and be confined inside a building with the noise from the machines and smells from the oil used in the process of cutting the metals. I could still remember the machine shop in Vilna, where I worked as an apprentice for about a year, and I thought working on cars would give me more freedom to learn how to drive a car and maybe soon own one myself. I took the job. Phil Welber suggested I get a haircut and shorten my overcoat (they were both long). After an interview with Henry Feferman (son of the owner of Feferman Motor Sales) who spoke some Yiddish, his sales manager, who was an Austrian Jew and spoke German, and his service manager, the job was mine.

I was told to go to the Jewish Welfare Agency and get some money so I could buy some needed tools for the job. The Jewish Welfare gave me \$60 and I went to Sears & Roebuck and bought some tools, I still have the original toolbox and some of the tools I bought some 50 years ago. I started as a helper to a mechanic, cleaning parts and doing things he wanted me to do. The pay was something like \$25 a week. The problem was my room and board was \$35 a week. For a few weeks, Alice's father loaned me some money to make up the difference. I was not happy, but not being able to communicate, there were not too many options open to me. I tried to find another job at another dealership but the owner, Eli Spicer, who was also Jewish and a friend of Henry Feferman, knew I worked for Feferman Motors. So he called Henry Feferman and told him that I was looking for another job. He, Spicer, told me to go back to Feferman and talk to Henry. I did and Henry Feferman changed

my job from a helper to a “flat rate mechanic” that meant I would get paid a flat rate per job. They used a factory manual to price each job and it took me much longer to do the job than the factory allowed. My next paycheck was \$15 for the week. I went back to Henry Feferman and complained; he told the service manager to put me to work on “new car preparation”. In those days, (right after the war), and the public wanting cars as soon as possible, the factory would ship the new cars to the dealers almost in parts, and the dealership would finish the assembly of the cars. The heaters, radios, mirrors, spotlights, and many other parts were shipped with the new car in the trunk of the new car. And I assembled the items in the new cars and in many cases had to adjust and repair things that did not fit, or work as they were delivered from the factory. I started to learn about cars and became quite good at it. My pay improved gradually. But I was not happy with the job, I didn’t like the uniform, the dirty clothes, the dirty cars- especially in the winter, working under the cars with the ice and snow dripping on me. I was generally discontented. Every time a new gadget was introduced to the new cars, they sent me to a school to learn about it. My work became more interesting and more technical as the new cars became more complicated.



Picture of me in uniform

I went to evening classes to learn English. I was never good at doing things in a normal routine way. I was too impatient to do things the way most people did. The classes were too slow for me. I found reading comic books a faster way to learn every day conversational English. I was satisfied with my progress and to my regret never pursued a better education. It seemed to me at that time that I was doing well enough to provide for the immediate needs of my life. Everybody was impressed with my progress and that contributed to my feeling. The fact that I had little formal education before I came to the States, and not being exposed to any better ideas than getting a secure job and immediately earning a living, also played a part in me not pursuing a better education. The "secure job" turned out to be, in my opinion, "a grave without a cover". I don't know who coined that phrase,

but it meant to me a hole very difficult to get out of. I thought I would try to become a draftsman, I went to evening classes and found that to be too boring and gave up. I was never happy with the job and even though I became very good at it and made a fair living from it I was never satisfied. I lived in a boarding house, worked at Feferman's and dated Alice. I visited Alice and her father and sister regularly. We dated, went out with friends and had a good time. Renate, (Alice's sister), helped with my English lessons.

Picture of Renate and me

We decided to get married, and on May 9, 1948 we got married at the Sinai Synagogue in South Bend. The Sinai Synagogue was on Wayne Street, in South Bend.

Picture from the wedding

After the wedding, dead tired, we took a train to Chicago for our honeymoon, and stayed in a hotel a few blocks from the train station. We were so naïve; we didn't know that the hotel was so close to the station that we could have walked, for in those days you could walk safely in Chicago at night. We took a cab from the station to the hotel, but the cab driver took us for a long ride. In the morning, we realized how close we were to the station. On the way to the station we looked for a place to have lunch. We saw this ordinary looking restaurant and walked in. It turned out to be a very famous and expensive restaurant named the "Black Hawk". From the outside it looked dark and nothing special. We went in and they sat us at a table. A photographer came over and asked us if we would like to have our picture taken. Of course, we said yes. We looked at the menu and didn't know what to order because the prices were outrageous. We decided to order the cheapest thing on the menu, a hamburger. We got the check for the meal and the pictures; I don't think I had enough money for a tip. But we did have tickets for the return trip to South Bend.

Picture from the restaurant

We rented a small apartment on a second floor near the apartment where Alice's father and sister lived. Life was good, I worked at Feferman's as a mechanic, and Alice worked in a shirt factory. We made many friends. On June 1, 1950, Dan was born. Just about that time a friend of Alice's father from New York found out that the German Government was making retribution payments to survivors of the Holocaust. I was paid \$4,000 for four years of misery. I hated the thought of accepting the money, but I did.

I read an article in the "Kiplinger magazine" how to invest in real estate. The gist of it was to buy a duplex apartment or house, live on one side, and rent the other side as an investment. I thought it was a good idea but Alice would have none of it. She wanted a home of her own. I thought the \$4,000 from Germany would make a good start to begin a real estate investment. I bought a single family house from a friend of mine I worked with at Feferman's; his name was Brian Roenfeldt. He was a new car salesman at Feferman's. We liked that name and named our 2nd son Brian. Brian was born May 10, 1952. David was born August 8, 1959.

One of our best friends was Norm and Yetta Holtzman. We became very close and did many things together. Our families did almost everything together. Norm wanted to be my partner in this real estate venture, he gave me \$2,000 and we named our investment "S & H partnership". He was a doctor and made much more money than I did, but I could fix almost anything and liked the idea of property ownership. So we started to buy a few more houses and I would fix things. Alice and Yetta would help with the cleaning and painting and I rented them. We accumulated a few houses in the next year or so. Other friends of ours were Ray and Adeline Goldstein. Ray, Norm and I played golf

together and on one occasion Ray said: Boris, I hear you and Norm are buying real estate and renting them out. Why don't we meet in my house and talk about forming a partnership. We met in Ray's basement; Ray invited some of his and our friends and we had quite a meeting. We agreed to form a partnership, buy, fix up, rent, and even sell, real estate. We put up \$50 a month each, like an investment club. Some people invested in stocks and started investment clubs that invested in stocks only, but I didn't understand the stock market and liked real estate better, so we started this real estate partnership. There were 10 of us at this meeting. What to call this partnership? After much discussion we thought: "TEN OPTIMISTIC THINKERS" would do or "T.O.T". In Yiddish it means "toches of'n tish" (butt on the table); or put your money where your mouth is. Later on we changed the partnership to a corporation, and I was voted in as President of T.O.T. Inc. It was a lot of hard work, but it fit in well with my mechanic's job at Feferman Motors. Since I was paid a "flat rate" for each job, not an hourly or weekly wage, I had the freedom to do more or less what I wanted with my time. So I would take the time to go look at properties or fix small things as needed in the houses or apartments during working hours. It worked pretty well, and we accumulated quite a few properties. But I was still unhappy being a mechanic and didn't know how to change that. So after repeated complaining to Henry Feferman, they made me service manager and that was the worst mistake I ever made. I had nothing but grief and troubles from all sides.

From customers, factory, mechanics, I couldn't handle the complaints, the criticisms. It was hell. But we had three children and a mortgage and not much money saved, I couldn't just quit, not having anything else to make a living from. Norm Holtzman suggested I get a real estate license. I had no intention in becoming a real estate salesman, but the idea of a real estate license intrigued me. So I enrolled in an evening real estate course and like before, I didn't do what everybody else did. I thought the teacher knew less than I did, so when the 6 week course was finished, I went to Indianapolis to take the real estate broker's test. I dressed in a business suit and thought it would be a good idea to get to Indianapolis the day before the test and check into a motel so I would be good and ready for the test the next day. In the morning I got up and I wanted to shave; I forgot my shaving kit. Panic struck. It was too late to buy a razor, so I got dressed in a business suit and with a day old beard went to the hotel where the test was given. I had no idea what the test would be like. I thought there would be a few dozen people taking the test. To my surprise it was a large ballroom with about 600 people in it taking the test. We sat eight to a round table; most of them wore sport shirts or casual dress, I think I was the only one with a business suit and unshaven. Some were taking the test for the third time. The test was much more difficult than I expected, I didn't think I had a chance of passing. The test was divided into two sessions, three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. I turned my papers in early and got out of the place thinking I didn't pass. Two months later I got a letter from the Real Estate Commissioner informing me that I failed by only 12 points out of 300 needed to pass. I had the right to ask for a review of my test, but it had to be done in person. At the review I was shown one calculation mistake that cost me 60 points. I decided to take the test again and passed it this time with a score over 300.

I continued to work at Feferman's and build my interest in rental properties.

One day in 1968 I finally got up enough nerve and after an argument with Henry Feferman over a misplaced file, I quit the job I held for 22 years.

A new chapter in my life began.

Well, the reason for not writing for a whole year is many, but to name just a few:

Dan was going to Germany and thought that this would be a good time to make the trip to Vilna I have talked so much about. With the help of a friend I made contact with the Director of the Holocaust Museum in Vilna and made arrangements for the trip to Vilna. We (Dan, Brian, David and I) finally revisited Vilna, my hometown, where I was born and lived for 18 years of my life, the last two in a Ghetto. We took many pictures, video film and voice tapes. It was a trip I dreamt of doing for many, many, years, and finally done did it. It was a wonderful trip. Much more than I expected.

It's September 8, 1994, 11:00 a.m. and I'm on my way to pick up Brian. We are going to drive to Chicago, pick up David and go to Vilnius. I can't believe it's going to happen. I've been thinking about it for probably 20 years and finally here it is! I don't know what to expect, I don't know what we're going to see, I have no idea at all, but, it's in the works and I'm sure Brian is going to have a lot more to say about it once we are on our way. So, I'm going to sign off in the meantime. Bye-bye!

Brian and I drove to Chicago. On the way to Chicago Brian and I taped a conversation (he called it a deposition) it was wonderful, he asked questions and I tried to tell him what I remembered.

"This is Brian, and I don't know if you want to do a test or not, Dad, but since I am the lawyer in the family, I'm supposed to be able to ask you questions in a logical sequence and we'll see."

It's September 8, 1994 as I think my Dad has said but it would probably be always good on the tape so when we work on them to give a date and time and kind of what we're doing.

At this point, we are on the toll road heading to pick up David and from there Susan and David are going to take us to the airport.

It's September 8, 11:35 AM. We'll break for lunch here at some point in time and really what I want to do before we get to David's house is just kind of lay the ground work a little bit on this tape before we get with David and Danny later. Danny is going to join us on Sunday in Vilnius and I guess so that we at least have the parameters of what we are dealing with here. So, as in any good deposition, the first questions would be for you to state your full name and your date of birth please."

I feel like I'm in court!

"Well, my full name is Boris Schuster, and as a matter of fact, my first name is Ber, or Berkele in Yiddish"

I was born April 15, 1925, and I am 69½ today."

"Is that your full name? It wasn't changed when you came from Europe?"

"Not when I came from Europe, but, I was told by my father that it may have been changed a long time ago by my Grandfather. I think it was changed from Chaikinsky to Schuster because during the czar's reign in Russia there was a 25-year conscription law for military service. Sometimes for money or other reasons, some people would go into the army in exchange for something else, and they would change their names. I don't know how my grandfather got involved in this, or whether it's true or not, but this is something in the back of my mind. A story of that sort, that my real name is not Schuster but Chaikinsky."

"Schuster is not a very common Jewish name."

I thought so, but since I come to the US, I found quite a few Jews named Schuster. Some spell it with a "Sh," some with a "Sch," "But there are also a lot of Schusters who are not Jewish."

"I've always thought of Schuster as more of a German name, and it makes sense because you were born where?"

"I was born in Vilna, which at that time was Poland, and very close to the Russian border so then the name Chaikinsky would make sense, because that's more of a Polish-Yiddish name."

"So you have some memory as a kid that your name was changed from Chaikinsky to Schuster. Do you know why Schuster?"

"No, Schuster in German means: Shoemaker, but neither my dad nor grandfather had anything to do with making shoes."

"Tell us a little about your family, names, where you fit in, etc. (Dad does have some of this in writing, but we'll go through it here, too)."

"My mother's name was Celia, and my dad's name was Fievel. I don't have any idea how old they were when I was born."

"I was the third son. There were four children, the first one was a girl, but I never knew her because she died when she was about 2 years old. My oldest brother was named Peretz; my second brother, Joseph (we called him Yoskele, in Yiddish), was two years younger than my older brother. In a very strange coincidence, I was six years younger than my middle brother, just like in our family with Danny, Brian, then David."

"There were no others?"

"I was the youngest of the three brothers, and there was a sister who died when she was a little girl. My father was about 53 when he died in the concentration camp, and I was 18 at the time, so that would make him 35 when I was born. I have no idea how old my mother was, we didn't talk about women's age! My father was a nickel and chrome platter. In those days, they had samovars, which in Russian means a "self warmer" like a tea kettle, where they boiled hot water. The samovar is free standing, coal is put in the center in a tube, and the water surrounds the tube and is boiled for tea. They were made of copper or brass, and the people who could afford it would buy them chrome plated. There was a chemical process where they would chrome plate, nickel plate or silver plate spoons, knives, forks, all kinds of things. This was a small shop. I think the owner was a Polish guy. He worked in the most horrible condition, a filthy place no one could ever imagine. He was not paid a decent wage, we were very poor. He worked long hours and took work home to polish the spoons and forks. I helped polishing the spoons and forks and helped make the brushes from horsehair to polish these things in the evening after school. The horses that pulled the cabs in those days used to wear a belt around the neck with bells; this was also chrome plated. There were big vats full of acid of some sort; through electrolysis, they used to add silver to the copper or the brass. My mom was a housekeeper. In those days, most women did not work outside the home, at least that I knew of. She took care of the house. My mom was a religious person. I think she wore a shaitel (I'm not sure). I don't think she was very literate. In those days the Jewish women did not participate in political discussions. She was a housekeeper and a mother. My father was the king of the house. When he came home, he got all the respect of a father who came home from a hard day's work."

"What was your dad like? What was your relationship like?"

"My father was a very gentle, loving, almost communist type person. He had a lot of compassion for people, not like some Republicans we know! He really was very intelligent, always interested in world affairs. He was able to read, but there weren't many books available. He and his friends used to have political discussions, which I was privy to listen to. They were about communism, socialism, and the workers Unions the "forain" in Yiddish."

We're talking about 1935-36. I was about 10 years old, and this was just the beginning of the depression, so things were even worse than they usually were. I know we were getting help from welfare, because we lived in a three room apartment, living room, one bedroom, and a kitchen, all 5 of us. There was a good size bedroom where my parents slept, and there was a curtain across the foot of the bed, and I slept on the other part of the room. I think my brother Joseph slept in the same bedroom. My oldest brother slept in the living room, which was also the dining room. There was a big table that we ate on, and there was a sofa next to the dining room table that doubled as a bed. We had no running water, no toilet. The "toilet" was an outhouse downstairs in the courtyard. We lived on the second floor, and there were like 5 or 6 outhouses in the courthouse, part of the apartment complex! When we had to go at night, we used a pot and carried it out in the morning. My dad would go to work early in the morning, and I remember taking lunch to him, which consisted of a pot of soup, and maybe a sandwich. My mother kept a kosher house, and my father abided by her wishes although he was not a religious person at all, even though he did not work on Sabbath and he went to shul. If you did work on Sabbath in that community, you were chastised, I'm sure. It was a very religious community. Everything was concentrated around the Synagogues. There was a major, large, "big shul", which was probably three stories high, with one level underground. I found out later, that was because no Jewish building was allowed to be higher than a certain height. This way they couldn't be higher than the Churches or any other building. I went to a Yiddish school, which I hope is still there. It was adjacent to a farmers market, which I remember vividly. I never officially finished that school, and it was probably like 9 grades. We had what was called pre-high school, and when I was 14, I went to work. So either I didn't finish officially or it was no more than 8 years of school. If you had the money, you could go to certain universities that had Jewish quotas. When they formed the ghetto all of that went by the wayside, and things like school were out of the question. I don't think I was bar mitzvah because of this. When I was 13 or 14 years old, my father had to pay someone for me to become an apprentice in a machine shop. I was an apprentice for about one or one and a half years, and after that the war broke out and there was concentration camp.

My dad came home at suppertime, and my mom had supper ready. Supper consisted of a few simple dishes: soup, meat and potatoes. We would sit at the same place at the table. My father had his spot, and my older brother was to his right, and the other brother was across the table from him, and I was next to the younger brother and to my mother. My mother was a very loving woman. In the living/dining room combination, there was a huge oven, about 4 or 5 feet in circumference type of oven that went from the floor to the ceiling. We burned coal and wood in that oven, and this is where some of the meals were prepared. It was also the source of heat for the apartment.

By heating up this enormous oven, which was brick inside and a metal covering on the outside, we would keep warm in the winter. We used to stand with our backs to it, and there was a little stool where my mother used to sit on in front of the opening. She would put me on her lap and sing little songs like "Oyf'n Pripetshok". I think it means "on the oven." There was a lot of hugging and kissing; we were a very close family. My oldest brother, Peretz, worked in a machine shop someplace, and he was just about ready to leave the house when I began to know what was going on. I don't remember him dating, I don't remember anything about my younger brother, though now I remember that he had a habit of taking a piece of bread and kneading it in his fingers. He would make a little ball out of it, and sometimes my mother would complain that he had it in his pocket and was playing with little kneaded balls of bread. Why this pops up all of a sudden I don't know. I wasn't aware of any arranged marriages. I remember Peretz was a little rebellious. He would refuse to eat certain food because the knaidlach were too hard or whatever. I also remember he played an instrument like a tuba. How, why, when, I don't know. I got along with him, but there wasn't much interacting because I don't remember much at all. There were no bad memories whatsoever. I don't remember what he

looked like, and I barely remember what my mother and father looked like. My middle brother was Joseph, Yoskele, I don't remember what he did, whether he graduated from school, or whatever."

"What do you first remember yourself?"

"There are in and out flashes of when I was 8-10 years old. I remember a weekly ritual of walking to a bathhouse which was located close to a river. It was actually a lumberyard, and because lumberyards used a lot of steam for cutting wood, there was a public bathhouse and a mikvah. I remember going there with my father. The street we had to take to get there was full of whorehouses. My immediate neighborhood was not all Jews. There was a narrow street on a hill. We were half way from the top in the middle of a one-block street. Opposite from our apartment was a brick building, and there were some richer people in that building, though who knows what rich meant. I don't think they were Jewish, because there was no interrelation. As a matter of fact, Sam Perkowitz lived in the same apartment building I did, but I never knew it. I didn't remember the name of the street until he mentioned it, Lotocheck. There were Jews and non-Jews living in the same area, but they didn't mix. There was a Jewish store where we went to buy 5 cents worth of sugar or a pickle out of a big pickle barrel. I don't know where the butcher shop was, or how we bought meat, those are the things I can't remember.

Jews were discriminated against well before the Germans came. For example, we were not citizens of Poland; we were not allowed to travel within 50 kilometers of the Russian border or any border. As a matter of fact, I think that if you wanted to go from one town to the next, you had to get a special permit to move, like a pass. The reason I remember there were whorehouses is because there were women in red robes trying to beckon my dad to come in. He would sheepishly try to keep me away from all this. I remember the bathhouse vividly because the ovens had stones in them that were being heated and for a few groshens (pennies) you got a little broom, which consisted of twigs with a few leaves on them. You held the broom high in the air to get it hot and rub your back with it. In the middle of the room was a water basin where you could get a drink of water. It was like a steam house, a public bathhouse. We would go there quite often, at least once a week, I'm sure.

Someplace in that neighborhood there was a friend of my father's who lived in a house or apartment, and we used to go there to listen to a radio about world affairs. It was secretly done because we were not allowed to do that.

I have no memory of aunts, uncles, or extended family. I know there was something like 80 to 100 people in our family, but I don't know where I got that number. Strangely enough, there was one tall redheaded girl that was some relation to me, and, an older women, a grandmother or aunt, on my mother's side, whom we used to visit in some sort of apartment. I was about 8-10 years old. I know there were a lot of uncles and aunts, but I don't remember family gatherings or running around with cousins my age.

I had a group of friends but I can't recall anyone. In school, I was a mediocre student. I remember my parents going to school for conferences, like they do today here, to find out how the children were doing and I would shake in my boots to wait till they came back and tell me what the teachers said. I remember the school had a basketball court inside. I don't remember playing any sports other than football or handball with some guys in back of the schoolyard. [My] memory gets better in 1936; the Germans were starting to send Jews and others to concentration camps in Germany. My father talked to his friends about this. I wasn't included in the conversation, but I overheard a little. They talked about how bad things were. It was also the depression, and my father lost his job. He worked on a street gang to repair cobblestone streets. He would bring back a loaf of bread and a herring, and my mother would cut up the herring on a plate and put pepper and onions and stuff on it, with maybe a little butter or schmaltz to smear on it. Butter or margarine with a little sugar on bread was really a treat. I was about 12 when my dad lost his job. When I was about 14, I went to work as an apprentice.

I didn't get paid any money for the work I did. I think my father had to pay someone to take me in as an apprentice. At first, as an apprentice, all I got to do was clean floors and machines. Later, I learned some work on a lathe or a planing machine and how to make some tools like sharpening drills or hardening cutting tools for the lathe. They did a lot of steam irons parts, bells for horses, some other mechanical devices like valves for plumbing and stuff like that. I know it was a privilege to get a job as a machinist apprentice.

I remember we lived in a ghetto like atmosphere all through my youth. We didn't mingle with no one [but] Jews. The only gentile I remember was the caretaker or janitor of the apartment. I even remember where he lived in the apartment building. If the apartment is still there, ("a big if"), I have memories of that building. I remember places we used to hide as kids, and when the Germans were looking for us. Places we used to keep potatoes for the winter, it's unbelievable what I can remember suddenly! For many years I couldn't remember any of this but as this trip to Vilna became closer and closer I started to think about this building, the doorways, hallways, stairways, the attic and all those places where we used to play as kids, and later hid from the Poles and Germans when they were coming to get us.

In 1939 the Germans entered the western half of Poland, and the Russians entered the eastern half. I was 14. Living conditions were very poor, and we were hearing about what was going on in Germany and elsewhere. I remember there was a lot of talk. There was a lot of talk about going to the United States, for those who had relations or could afford it. I don't know if anyone from my family got out to the United States. I don't remember any aunts or uncles or cousins or anyone who got out of Poland. I know there was talk about the US, but I have no real recollection of details about it. The Russians entered the Eastern half of Poland, and my family (father, brothers, and I) felt liberated because the Russians took kindly to the working class. Again, I have a vague recollection of a Russian soldier, from the occupation force, sleeping in our house. He kept his gun under his pillow when he slept in our house. I also remember an apprentice in the machine shop I worked in, he was the son of a Russian captain. This was my first introduction to alcohol.

He and I were left one day to unload a load of steel for the machine shop. Everyone else was gone, and we were left to work overtime, to wait until the truck came and unload the steel. He was 4 or 5 years older than I was, and he was already smoking and drinking pretty good. He went across the street and bought a bottle of vodka that was the size of a glass coke bottle. He came back and put his thumb halfway down the bottle and gulped down half the bottle of vodka and gave me the other half. I was not about to let this guy think that I never drank, so I gulped the other half. I woke up in my house. I passed out cold, I don't know what happened. So that's the first introduction I got to alcohol.

The Russians were there for 2 years, until 1941. When Russia and Germany went to war with each other, it took only a few weeks for the Germans to take over the eastern half of Poland. It was like the blitzkrieg you've heard about. The Russians did not resist the German advance, they simply packed up whatever they could and ran east. They decided not to defend this land. They retreated immediately. Whoever could get away from the German army, did. My oldest brother jumped on a Russian tank and took off with the Russians. There was pandemonium and panic, but my father still had control of the family. I don't know how it came about that my oldest brother left, but one day he was no longer with us. It was so chaotic, and there was so much activity going on, everyone was looking out for themselves. The four of us were still left in the same apartment, but things went fast, like one day the Russians were there and the next day the Germans were there. We heard rumors about the Germans; the anticipation was unbelievable because we didn't know what to expect. As a matter of fact, I remember, and if we get there and the place is still there, I'll show you the spot where we stood, where three streets come together in front of a huge Russian or Catholic Church, and we welcomed the Germans! We stood on the sidewalk and watched the Germans on

motorcycles and military vehicles enter Vilna. I don't know whether we knew that this was bad for the Jews. It was absolute pandemonium. The Poles helped the Germans seek out the Jews because they knew where everyone lived. The Poles had little swastika armbands, and they were immediately mobilized by the Germans to be the police. We knew this was trouble, but not what kind of trouble to expect. They, the Germans and the Polish helpers, would come to the apartments or homes and gather up groups of Jews, at first the men, around the age of 50 or whatever.

Whoever didn't hide, they would get, assemble them on the street in a marching column, tell them to take a bar of soap and a towel, and that they would go to work for the Germans and they would bring them back. We never saw them again. This went on for about 2-3 weeks, and each time, we knew that they would look for men to take. So we started to find hiding places. We were still living in the apartment on Lotocheck, and as a kid I had hiding places that, if the building is still there, I could show you the places I hid in right now. They were in an attic, and it was almost impossible for a grownup to crawl through the rafters, but as kids we did. When the Germans started gathering the men, we started hiding. Somehow, my dad, brother, and I were able to hide until the last day when we all went to the ghetto. Picture this, we didn't know anything about the ghetto being built or how they were blocking off streets to make a ghetto, we had no idea what was happening. We could not communicate with anyone outside our apartment. Later on, we found out that some of the men taken earlier from their homes were building the walls between the buildings to create the ghetto; others were killed and some were taken to other towns where ghettos were already started.

We were not allowed to walk in the streets at certain times of the day, we were like on "house arrest" in our apartment. We had to wear a yellow star on our chest, over our hearts, and on the back of our clothes. If you were found on the street without it, you were shot on the spot. I think we also had some armbands with a "J" for Jude, or Jew. As a matter of fact, your Mom still has the star with a J on it. We knew that there was no more hiding, Either they got us out of our hiding places or we came out on our own. I've told the story about hanging in an outhouse, just like the scene in Schindler's list; I told that story 10 years before Schindler ever thought about making the movie! I told the story to Mayer Goloubow, and I couldn't believe it when he told me the story from the movie.

We were told to gather whatever we could carry on our backs and to assemble on the street, which we did. We took a sheet from the bed and gathered all the soft stuff, clothes, and other small things, which we carried on our back. My mom, father, and brother stood in the same column. My father had a few ten ruble gold pieces, which were the size of a dime, and he gave one to me, and one to Joseph, so in case we were separated he thought we should have some money. Maybe he had some himself. We kept it in our mouth, because the story was already out that they would search you, and if you had something valuable, they would take it away from you. We carried the bundles of clothes in the bed sheet and marched downtown, where the ghetto was. On the way, they told us to stop and drop everything where we stood, which we did, and they marched us into the ghetto and locked the gates.

So that's why I don't have a picture or anything else; we were left with the clothes on our backs, everything else was gone.

There were 75,000 Jews in Vilna (though I hear now that there were more that came from Warsaw and other towns to escape the western part of Poland).

Whose apartments we occupied? How we slept? I don't remember. All I remember is daily assemblies on the streets, marched to work, and came back at night to sleep in the ghetto. I was with my family the whole time. One evening, after returning from work, I learned of my mother's death. She died of hernia strangulation. I don't remember if it was the first or second year of our being in the ghetto, and I'm not sure who told me, probably my father. I don't remember going to a funeral, and I don't know what they did with the bodies from the so-called "hospital" in the ghetto.

We weren't paid any money for our work in the Ghetto. We got food rations. There was a Jewish government (Judenrat) in the ghetto, and Jewish police called kapos. If you were to put them in a pecking order as to the meanest, the worst were the kapos. The next was the German SS and of course the Polish police.

We were all living in a dream world where you were trying to do the thing that would not get you killed this instant. Whether it was hiding behind a taller person in a lineup, so you would not be seen or noticed, or whatever it took to survive that day. We would be taken to work, and if we were lucky enough to work in a field where there were potatoes, carrots, or things like that (I remember a lot of sugar beets) we would risk our lives by stealing some and hiding them in our uniform coats. We cut the lining in our overcoats and hid them there. But at the gate of the ghetto, before we got in, there were raids and we would be searched. So everyone would drop everything, before we got searched. These are the kinds of things I remember.

This was 1941-43."

I found out that I had Prostate Cancer and had an operation to remove the prostate.

It took all my enthusiasm away to continue the so-called " story of my life".

Today is the 2nd day of January 1995 and I am trying to take my mind off my problems.

It is not working too good!

Hopefully I will be able to concentrate more after we return from Palm Springs, the 1st of March.

Well , this is January 26, two days short of two month after my operation, and five days before our trip to Palm Springs.

I thought I would write a little about my experience the last two months.

The operation itself was not too bad.

I was in the hospital for 5 days and because I was given pain medication by epidermal procedure, the pain was controlled very well and was for the most part comfortable.

The most uncomfortable thing was the drain from my abdomen and a catheter to drain the urine from the bladder to a bag attached to my leg.

The abdominal drain was covered with a large dressing and taped to my skin. They had to change the dressing very often and that of course meant taping and re-taping the dressing.

After a while the skin became irritated and very sore.

When I came home from the hospital, Alice had to help change the dressing and I had to figure out how to change the hook up from the catheter to the bag that collected the urine.

The instructions from the hospital at the time of discharge was, to say the least, very inadequate and none from Mark Toth.

My state of mind was terrible, the whole thing came crashing down on me so hard I don't think I will ever be able to explain the feeling.

I thought I knew what incontinence meant, but I had no idea what it felt like.

Let me tell you, not only was the catheter in my penis for two weeks after I came home from the hospital, but it was leaking outside the catheter, and Mark Toth didn't know why. I ended up in the hospital emergency room twice.

The first time they changed the catheter, that didn't help much, the second time they not only changed the catheter, but took pictures of my bladder to see if the catheter was properly inserted or what else could be wrong.

To no avail, it was just miserable, and all Mark could say was " he will have to live with it"

Well I wasn't ready to finish my life like that.

Of course my anger and depression were not appreciated by anyone.

If I talked about it to Alice I made her feel terrible. If I talked to Dan about it, I felt like a cry baby that couldn't take it.

I didn't want to make other people feel bad about it, but I couldn't keep it in me without talking about it.

It was on my mind all the time!!!

To start from the beginning:

About 14 months ago I took a PSA test, I had no problems, no symptoms, I heard about it, so I took it.

Well the count was something like 7.6, slightly elevated.

I was told not to worry, we will keep an eye on it.

Three months later, I took another test that was 8.6. Well, lets do a biopsy. The biopsy showed a minute cancer cell.

Every three months, I took a PSA test and it kept moving up. When the count went to 10.8 Mark Toth suggested I should have the prostate removed.

He suggested three options:

1) Leave it alone, "you will die from something else".

2) Radiation, not sure to get it all , painful treatment and unknown complications such as diarrhea.

3) Remove the prostate if it has not spread to the lymph nodes or the bone.

Complications? Incontinence. Percentage of incontinence? very small, Mark said "

I only had one [question]. I ask, "one in how many operations?",

"Oh, I lost count of how many operations I did."

After talking to Dr. Dan, I agreed to pursue the removal of the prostate.

Well after all the tests returned negative and there was no spread of cancer that could be detected, I went through the operation to remove the prostate.

As I said before the operation was not bad, but the next two months were hell!

This is March 8, 1995:

We are back from Palm Springs, the weather in South Bend stinks as far as I am concerned, cold, snow, cloudy, no sun, no flowers, the streets are dirty, the golf courses are closed.

I am thinking, it is time to move to a warmer climate for at least three months, January February and March. I have a lot of persuading to do to my sweetheart to accomplish it.

As to my incontinence problem, Dan saved my sanity.

The exercise, (Kegel exercise) and the exterior catheter was my salvation, (not suggested by Mark) by the way.

At this date it is getting better. There are signs that the incontinence may not be permanent. I am improving every day.

March 30, 1995:

Yes, I am improving further, I no longer need to use a catheter, I am hopeful that soon I will be back to normal , I am about 90% continent. The world looks better again.

AFTERWORD

by Don Schuler

My dad died of brain cancer on October 22nd, 2002.

My brother's death in 1996 was the first time I saw my father. I was a long time away from the hospital and home. But, as an elderly man, I was not really in "good health" and I was not really in "good health" and I was not really in "good health".

My father's death in 1996 was the first time I saw my father. I was a long time away from the hospital and home. But, as an elderly man, I was not really in "good health" and I was not really in "good health".

January 28, 1996.

Alice had the house spick and span; everything ready for our annual SuperBowl party.

I went to watch Ryan play hockey at the Notre Dame ice rink.

Brian just returned from a trip to Japan and Korea.

We stood together in the bleachers and watched Ryan play.

Ryan's team won the game.

Brian kissed me and said; Dad I'll see you later.

He went to the bathroom and I went home to help Alice with the party.

I sat down in my favorite chair and started to adjust the television for the upcoming football game.

The phone rings.

It's Cheri: Brian collapsed.

I jumped in the car and raced to the ice rink. Brian was already in an ambulance.

They wouldn't let me see him.

We followed the ambulance to the hospital.

My son is dead!

AFTERWORD

By Dan Schuster

My dad died of brain cancer on October 24th, 2000.

My brother's death in 1996 was a tremendous blow to my father. For a long time, any zest for life for him was gone. But, as so often happens, perhaps especially to "survivors", he slowly began to get back into his routine and seemed to enjoy life once again.

Somewhere around 1998, Dad began having problems with his vision. This turned out to be macular degeneration of the retina, which causes one to lose so-called "central" vision. As a result, it became increasingly difficult for him to read, to see faces clearly, etc. But the problem seemed to stabilize after awhile, and once again, Dad learned to compensate. With the use of bright lights and magnifiers, he was able to read. With the use of large font, he was able to view text in a computer screen. He "discovered" the Internet and spent many enjoyable hours "surfing" the Web. Somehow, he was even able to keep playing golf.

Then, on my 50th birthday (June 1, 2000), Mom and Dad called to wish me congratulations. In just a few minutes, however, the conversation turned. Dad was having new visual problems, of a very strange type. They were almost hallucinatory: faces were distorted and multiple images of the same thing would appear in his vision. He went to an ophthalmologist, but the macular degeneration was unchanged. The problem had to be in his brain, and indeed, an MRI showed a cancer in his occipital lobe, the area of the brain that controls vision.

My father was incessant during those few weeks that if he couldn't look at my mother and see "her beautiful, lovely face", that life would be intolerable. Miraculously, the visual distortion went away in about two weeks. We never discovered why, but for the next two months, Dad was basically back to his "baseline" state. He underwent radiation treatment, but by the end of that therapy, his vision began to deteriorate. As a result of tumor growth and radiation damage, he began to lose peripheral vision as well.

From that point on, it was downhill. His vision continued to get worse, his gait became unsteady, he would sleep for more and more of each day. He became increasingly depressed.

The situation was obviously so bad that I and my family went to see him on October 22nd. We were still able to talk to one another. He told us that he had had a good life. In these past few months, he had made a list of things he needed or wanted to do in his life, and all the items were checked off.

On October 23rd, we all gathered around before we were to go back to St. Louis and gave him kisses and hugs. It was obviously a time of saying goodbye. We knew the end was near, but not how near. The next day, he was dead.

This story of my father's survival is, undoubtedly, no more – and no less – miraculous than the stories of any and all Jews who survived Nazi Germany. But it was a miracle nonetheless. His memoir to us was, and is, a great gift.

